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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the efforts of educators in the former communist nations of central and eastern Europe, particularly those of Estonia and Poland. In spite of diverse histories and cultures, each of these nations has shared a legacy of totalitarian communism imposed by the former Soviet Union. This inheritance has afflicted all former communist countries of this region with handicaps that fundamentally obstruct their march toward authentic constitutional democracy. This paper discusses three common problems in the way of reconstructed civic education for liberal constitutional democracy: (1) conceptual confusion or different meanings, often subtle shades of difference, attached to key words by civic educators from the West and their counterparts from former communist countries; (2) constitutional cynicism or an undervaluing or skepticism about constitutions as effective instruments for the rule of law and protection of human rights; and (3) democratic ethnocentrism or a blend of fervor for democracy and ethnicity, that can be linked both to conceptual confusion and the residue of Soviet and Russian imperialism. This third problem is a tendency to view democracy simply or primarily as the will of the country's ethnic majority, irrespective of the wishes of particular individuals or groups who do not or cannot identify with this monolithic and permanent majority faction. A deep commitment to constitutionalism as protection against any form of tyranny and guarantor of human rights can contribute much to the resolution of this third problem. (DK)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

# CIVIC EDUCATION IN FORMER COMMUNIST COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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# Civic Education in Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe

by John J. Patrick

From 1987 through 1991, as we Americans celebrated the Bicentennials of our Constitution and Bill of Rights, global symbols of free government and rights to liberty, long-repressed peoples of central and eastern Europe overthrew despotic regimes and contemplated an unprecedented social and political transformation. They intrepidly intended to construct liberal constitutional democracy from the ruins of totalitarian communism. And they quickly recognized the critical importance of civic education to their aspirations. Vaclav Havel, the great Czech leader, wrote, "The most basic sphere of concern is schooling. Everything else depends on that."[1] His opinion echoes throughout the region. An Estonian educator (Sulev Valdmaa), for example, told me during a recent interview, "Development of a free and democratic Estonia depends upon development of effective and pervasive civic education for Estonian citizens. It can happen no other way."[2]

Educators of central and eastern Europe have looked to the West, especially to the United States of America, for inspiration, material aid, and, above all else, ideas for civic education in support of liberal constitutional democracy. Can we help them? Can core ideas of American civic education, embedded in our founding documents, become staples of curricula in schools of

former communist countries such as Estonia, Poland, and the Czech Republic? What legacies of the totalitarian communist past are likely to impede civic education for a democratic constitutional future? Can civic ideas nurtured in the West be cultivated in lands with only few or sporadic experiences with them during long eras of tyranny even before the recent period of communist misrule?

I seriously considered these questions for the first time during three intense days in mid-September 1990, at an extraordinary meeting in the home of our fourth president and greatest constitutionalist, James Madison. I was among a small group of Americans invited by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to Madison's Montpelier in Virginia's Orange County to discuss civic education--its goals, substance, and methods--with representatives of former communist countries of central and eastern Europe. The Europeans ernestly expressed their hopes for a democratic future and their fears of problems inherited from their communist past, with emphasis on the problems. Jacek Strzemieczny of the Polish Ministry of National Education, for example, stressed the complex problem of overcoming the residual effects of Marxist civic education, which for more than forty years had directed the minds and spirits of teachers and students toward ends diametrically opposed to liberal constitutional democracy. He lamented, "Teachers of history [and civics] were either indoctrinated or repressed. We have to start

over completely and train the trainers of the teachers. We are trying to fill an empty well with an empty bucket in a very great hurry."[3]

Dr. Strzemieczny and other central and eastern Europeans asked the Americans at Montpelier for help in filling the "empty bucket" and thereby initiated projects in civic education that have brought me several times since 1991 to six former communist countries: Czech Republic, East Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, and Romania. My visits have been most numerous and for longer periods to Estonia (three times for a total of 27 days) and Poland (five times for a total of 37 days), and I have been in both countries as recently as April and June of 1994. So, examples in the remainder of this piece will be drawn primarily from my experiences in Estonia and Poland, where I have been centrally involved in projects to convert civic education from dreary exercises in Marxist-Leninist propaganda to lively lessons in learning how to think and act as a citizen of a free country.

The differences in Polish and Estonian history and culture are very great, but they, in common with other diverse peoples and countries of their region of Europe, have shared a legacy of totalitarian communism imposed by the former Soviet Union. This fateful inheritance has afflicted all former communist countries of this region with handicaps that fundamentally obstruct their march toward authentic constitutional democracy. Three common

problems in the way of reconstructed civic education for liberal constitutional democracy are especially important. I label them (1) conceptual confusion, (2) constitutional cynicism, and (3) democratic ethnocentrism, and I have encountered each problem again and again during my work with teachers and developers of new curricula.

The problem of conceptual confusion refers to different meanings, often subtle shades of difference, attached to key words by civic educators from the West and their counterparts from former communist countries. In my experience, this conceptual confusion has sometimes stemmed from the vagaries of a translator's efforts to recast an abstract thought from English into Estonian, Polish, or some other languague of central and eastern Europe. More often, however, the problem has originated from deeper cultural or philosphical divisions.

Democracy and rights, for instance, were important words in the lexicon of Marxist-Leninist philosophers and civic educators of central and eastern Europe, but their denotations of these terms differed radically from those attached to the same words by scholars and educators of the West. Thus most teachers of the former "people's democracies" of central and eastern Europe bring ideologically distorted meanings of key ideas to programs designed to teach them concepts and methods of a new civic education for democracy. According to Wiktor Kulerski, who had been a school

teacher before becoming a hero of Poland's revolutionary struggle of the 1980s, "The great majority of civics teachers today are the same people who taught the Marxist versions of these courses in the past, and they are deeply conservative in their retention of old ideas and methods."[4]

Professor Radmila Dostalova of Charles University in Prague, the Czech Republic, gave me another reason for conceptual confusion in discussions with civic educators from the West. "We were prevented from following the developments in social sciences that have taken place in the West since 1939.... This long-term isolation has created many problems in the discussions [among ourselves and with Westerners] concerning the aims, content, and form of civic education."[5] The Czechs and other peoples of central and eastern Europe were greatly restricted in their access to Western scholarship in political science, which forms the foundation for civic education in the United States and other constitutional democracies. Thus the teachers of these former communist countries tend to suffer from a serious deficit in knowledge necessary to implementation of a new civic education for liberal constitutional democracy.

A second problem, closely related to conceptual confusion, is constitutional cynicism, by which I mean an undervaluing or skepticism about constitutions as effective instruments for the rule of law and protection of human rights. Given their recent

experiences under Soviet-style constitutions, which grandly proclaimed all kinds of rights while guaranteeing none of them, it is not surprising to see widespread constitutional cynicism instead of the constitutional faith that prevails in western democracies. Bronislaw Geremek, a former member of Poland's parliament and an eminent historian, has aptly described the problem as it afflicts former communist countries throughout central and eastern Europe, "'Constitution': it is difficult to imagine another word more likely to be abused and compromised in a totalitarian system [such as Poland under the Communists].... The ciizens' education, as then practiced, made the constitution its subject matter. But we all realize how much the idea of citizens' education was not only abused but also compromised by school education."[6]

This undervaluing of constitutionalism, however, may yield negative consequences for the developers of new civic education and the new nation-states that their curricula would support. Born-again believers in democracy thoughout central and eastern Europe have tended to put their faith in parliamentary majorities as agencies of popular states that would secure their rights to life, liberty, property, and various entitlements voted by their representatives in government. They have seemed oblivious to lessons of history, as old as the democratic city republics of ancient times, about the dangers of majoritarian tyranny so likely to occur in the absence of effective constitutional restraints.

Wiktor Osiatynski, a highly regarded Polish scholar and advisor to his government, has recommended that the idea of constitutionalism should become the foundation for development of democratic government and civic education. According to him, "[T]he goal is constitutionalism as an awareness of rights and of some legal order in which the citizens live--of a consciousness of limited powers, of measures for appeal, of rules of the game which allow the citizens to forsee the future."[7] Thus Osiatynski and many others like him in his region of Europe would constitutionalize democracy, in civil government and civic education, to secure the immutable rights of all persons living under the regime's authority, including unpopular minorities and individuals.

A deep commitment to constitutionalism as protection against any form of tyranny and guarantor of human rights can contribute much to resolution of a third problem of democratic civic education and national development: I call it democratic ethnocentrism. It is a peculiar blend of fervor for democracy and ethnicity, which can be linked both to conceptual confusion and the residue of Soviet and Russian imperialism. This problem especially afflicts countries such as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which had been incorporated into the Soviet Union or its predecessor, the Russian Empire of the Tsars.

This problem is a tendency to view democracy simply or

primarily as the will of the country's ethnic majority, irrespective of the wishes of particular individuals or groups who do not or cannot identify with this monolothic and permanent majority faction. Thus Latvia, a small country with only a 52 percent Latvian majority, has constructed its laws of citizenship to favor the slim ethnic majority against the claims of other ethnic groups, especially Russians, who have often exercised imperial domination over this land. Likewise, the 62 percent Estonian majority is anxious about maintaining its rights of majority rule over a large Slavic minority comprised mostly of Russians, who in the past have been imperial masters. So Estonians, too, have constructed political institutions and laws to protect the rights of the ethnic majority, which have so often in the past been at risk from powerful neighbors, especially Russia.[8] The Preamble to the Estonian Constitution proclaims "the inextinguishable right of the Estonian people to national self-determination...which shall guarantee the preservation of the Estonian nation and its culture throughout the ages."[9]

Some important proponents of new education for democracy in these lands tend to base their conceptions of democracy on the rights of an ethnic majority to use the power of a democratic state for the overriding purpose of protecting and maintaining a particular ethnic culture, its language and traditions, against subversion or domination by alien ethnic groups or powers. Minority rights are an important part of this civic education for

democracy, but seemingly in a subordinate way, which in a national crisis could put these rights at risk. Minority rights, in this conception of democracy, are primarily a function of the majority will and are given to citizens by the democratic state that the majority commands.[10]

This conception, of course, is at variance from the Western argument, stemming from the Enlightenment and the American founding era, that certain rights of individuals are inalienable and that, instead of being the source of human rights, governments, democratic or otherwise, are established primarily to secure them for all inhabitants of a realm. Thus the modern conception of western democracy paradoxically but authentically provides majority rule with protection of minority rights and thereby offers the antidote to majority tyranny, a malady that so readily emerges from overemphasis on the rights of majority factions based on ethnicity or other criteria. Democracy as majority rule with constitutional protection of minority rights, regardless of ethnicity, is certainly advocated by leading civic educators of Estonia and Latvia. Their efforts, however, are understandly tempored by historical and current realities that hover ominously over the Baltic region.

It is not so difficult to understand the tendency of an ethnic group to use the power of a democratic state to preserve itself against the perception of mortal threats, which are

grounded in historical realities. I recently witnessed one of these realities (June 30, 1994), an artifact of recent history at Kuusalu, on the Baltic seacoast of Estonia, where a Soviet military base had been established to provide sites for launching toward the west rockets armed with nuclear warheads. The stalls that once harbored deadly missles are now empty and broken. Paint is peeling from rundown buildings marked by the hammer and sickle and red star emblems of the once-proud Soviet Union. But there are ghosts of history at this abandoned site, which grimly remind Estonians of their tortured past and painful present relationships with powerful neighbors. For example, as of the end of June 1994, almost three years after Russia recognized Estonian independence and sovereignty over its land, several thousand Russian troops were still quartered in prime parts of Estonia. The same situation prevailed at this time in Latvia. Further, both Estonia and Latvia suffered severely from the forced relocation or extermination of several thousand of their former inhabitants by Soviet authorities. Finally, Russia has recently asserted its opposition to Estonian claims for the return to its sovereignty of territory on its southeastern border seized by the Stalinist Soviet government.[11]

It is remarkable that despite ethnic tensions stimulated by current reminders of a sad history, teachers of Estonian and Russian ethnicity regularly attend seminars together in Estonia to learn core ideas of liberal constitutional democracy, which may in

the near future become the core of a new and pervasive civic education in their country. These seminars in Estonia, where I participated as a lecturer and discussion leader, were sponsored jointly by the Jaan Tonisson Institute of Estonia and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems of the United States of America, two private-sector organizations cooperating on a project funded primarily by private foundations, such as the Pew Charitable Trusts. There are similar projects underway throughout central and eastern Europe (funded by agencies of the United States government and private foundations in North America and Europe) to provide teachers and educators of teachers with the best scholarship that pertains to civic education from various disciplines, such as history, philosophy, political science, and economics. These projects are educating teachers and developing new curricular frameworks and textbooks for use in primary and secondary schools.

Richard Remy of the Mershon Center at The Ohio State University, for example, has conducted a notable project in cooperation with the Ministry of National Education in Poland and the Bureau for Civic Education in Local Control Schools, directed by Jacek Strzemieczny. This project, "Education for Democratic Citizenship in Poland," has conducted conferences for Polish teachers, developed curricular frameworks and instructional materials for use in Polish schools, and created a course syllabus for Poland's future teachers, "Schools and Democratic Society."

Through this exemplary project, Poland has become the leader of civic education reform among former communist countries.

Civic education projects, such as those in Estonia and Poland, are likely to resolve the problem of conceptual confusion, which has interfered with curricular and pedagogical reform. The problems of constitutional cynicism and democratic ethnocentrism, while also treatable through systematic programs of education, are dependent for their resolution upon political and economic developments of the future, which may or may not be compatible with core ideas of liberal constitutional democracy.

The risky road ahead, full of obstacles, is clearly seen by Barbara Malak-Minkiewicz--a scholar, political activist in Solidarity's struggle against communism, and participant in the project on "Education for Democratic Citizenship in Poland." She says that upon the fall of communist regimes, "It looked like the ideas of Western civilization finally had triumphed. However, now that the dust has settled, one can see that the implementation of these ideas is neither automatic nor simple. In the ruin of communism, with its broken economy, messy values, and corroded institutions, a most significant political battle has begun. It is a battle for democracy. Its outcome is far from decided."[12] New civic education programs under development in Poland, Estonia, and elsewhere in central and eastern Europe could profoundly influence this outcome. This possibility is their primary justification.

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